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## VFW Looks To Congress To Build On President's VA Budget

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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*Washington, D.C., Feb. 4, 2003*-While the president's VA budget calls for \$27.5 billion for VA's health care, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. today charged that the veterans health care system remains seriously under-funded and that they intend to urge the Congress to provide the desperately needed additional funding.

"With an aging veteran population in need of health care and with 200,000 veterans waiting six months or more for their first appointment in VA, the health care system which veterans have come to depend on remains unable to respond to all of their needs," said VFW Commander-in-Chief Ray Sisk.

Sisk also emphasized that as the nation pursues the war on terrorism, with the tragic prospect of combat wounds and casualties, thousands of younger veterans may soon have to turn to VA for the special care and services only it can provide. "We are morally bound to ensure VA medical care is fully in place for these men and women in the event it is required," Sisk added.

VFW officials estimate that the administration's VA budget is at least \$2 billion short of what is needed to fully meet the demand for quality health care.

Currently, more than 6.6 million individuals are enrolled in VA's health care system with an expected patient load of 4.8 million sick and disabled veterans in the coming year. Due to budgetary shortfalls, the department recently suspended enrollment of category 8 veterans, those with incomes exceeding a set threshold and no service-connected ailments. Such veterans now will be denied access to the system altogether.

Sisk said the president's VA budget centers on provision to charge a \$250 annual enrollment fee to non-service connected veterans along with increased user-fees. There also is greater reliance on third party collections from insurance companies for certain veteran's medical care not related to military service.

"Along with looking to veterans to cover an ever greater amount of the cost of operating the VA system, there is a very apparent move here to suppress demand for veterans medical care that we of the VFW find most disturbing," said Sisk. "As our nation stands on the edge of war with Iraq, we must ask what kind of message this sends to our young men and women who may soon stand in harm's way as well as to our former defenders in their time of need. They have earned and deserve the very best medical care system we can

provide."

In addition to seeking increased funding for veterans' medical care, Sisk said that the VFW would conduct a letter writing campaign targeting Congress and the administration urging them to support mandatory funding of the VA health care system that would provide sufficient dollars for all enrolled users.

The VFW, the Disabled American Veterans and the American Legion, as well as numerous veterans and military organizations, have joined together in seeking mandatory or guaranteed funding in order to sustain and enhance the VA health care system.

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